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ABSTRACT

Today's model of education forces students to assimilate, to compete against each other, to think only in abstract complex ways, and to believe that cultural separation leads to academic power. For many minority and nontraditional students, this traditional model is inappropriate. It results in many first-generation students being told that they are "not college material," and consequent feelings of doubt, fear, and frustration when entering college. Many students feel disappointed because they feel that their life experiences are not valued, and they yearn for acceptance and validation. Faculty and other students have often served as validating agents for those students who do persist, encouraging them not to give up. On a broader scale, colleges as a whole must allow themselves to be changed by new student cultures. Educators must do a better job of understanding, appreciating, and working with culturally diverse students. Many of these students are going through powerful changes, and college educators should make a more determined effort to help students make the connection to college and assist them to become powerful learners. A proactive academic and interpersonal validation is needed to involve passive or doubtful students. Such efforts as calling students by name, calling them at home, stopping to talk to students in the halls can help students feel college is worthwhile. Educators must also find ways to change the linear model of teaching and diversify the curriculum by incorporating both the traditional core curriculum and perspectives that reflect the thinking and contributions of women and minorities. Further they must set high standards and believe their students are capable of learning. Both colleges and their students must change together if minority students are to experience academic success. (MAB)

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VALIDATING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

Presentation at

National Community College Chairs Conference

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VALIDATING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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It was during my first year of graduate school, at the University of Michigan, far away from the Laredo, Texas barrio that claims my youth, that I read Richard Rodriguez's eloquent essay, "Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy." The essay talks about how college requires outsiders who enter its culture to make fundamental changes in their attitudes and behaviors in order to become successful college students.

It is difficult to explain the piercing psychological pain I began to feel as I read Richard Rodriguez's essay. To become an academic success, Richard had learned that he had to sever ties with his past. He had learned that he had to forget the Spanish language in favor of English. He had learned that assimilation into the mainstream culture was key to total success. He expressed how his parents regretted the fact that education had changed him, and "put big ideas into his head." He described the anguish of feeling uncomfortable with his parents when he went home with his new found identity. What were once intimate conversations had become polite interviews.

As the first in my family who had taken the journey from a community college to a major research university, I asked myself: If Richard was the new American Scholarship boy, was I the new American Scholarship girl? I began to realize that the transition to college meant coming to terms with necessary losses--that guilt, pain and confusion can come from making the transition from one culture to another.

My early beginning are in stark contrast with my present. Today, I am considered an academic success, I am called upon for my expertise on educational issues, I am told that I am one of the most marketable Hispanic females in higher education. But my trip from the barrio to the academy has hardly been silky smooth. I still remember the first time I actually made the decision to attend college. I was 13 and in the eighth grade when a counselor visited our English class. She announced that on that day we had to make a decision about whether we wanted to be on an academic or vocational track. When I asked her to explain the difference she said that the academic track was for those that were going to college and that the vocational track was for those who were going to get a job.

Always dreaming of being a teacher, the choice was an easy one for me to make. I remember going home that afternoon and proudly telling my mother of my decision. Dismayed she said, *"Estas loca. Como piensas ir al colegio si nadie de nuestra familia ha ido? Eso es para los ricos."* For my mother who had gone only to the third grade, the choice would have been clear. In our family, going to college was not an option, for higher education belonged to the elite, the wealthy, and we clearly did not fit that definition.

Nonetheless, right after high school graduation I enrolled at Laredo Junior College. Here, I found that like me, my friends were perplexed about what it would take to succeed in this alien world of higher education. I also began to find myself trying to reconcile my new world with my old culture. I knew that my mother was feeling angry and frustrated with my tenacious desire to go to college, even though we never really talked about it.

It was a subject that was broached in different ways. She would explain that she was tired of being a waitress. She would be irritable at the fact she had to work night shifts to sustain the family. I knew that for her the vision of an ideal daughter was one that promptly after graduation from high school would get a job so that her mother would not have to work any more.

When I transferred to San Antonio College and from there to the University of Houston, I felt isolated and disconnected. None of my professors were Hispanic, and I did not feel my white professors recognized my full academic potential. I also found myself being perceived differently by my family, and I found that the language of college did not belong in my family life. When my mother would call and I would tell her how busy I was, she would encourage me to come home and give up everything. "*Vente, hija*, she would say, "*ya deja todo eso.*" And my father continuously emphasized that it was not only formal education, but experience that was necessary to cope with real life. I sensed that deep in my parent's soul they felt resentful about how this alien culture of higher education was polluting my values and customs. College was making me different. I was become a stranger to them, a stranger they did not quite understand, a stranger they might not even like.

Today, I am asked to speak to educators about people like me, people of color who come to college as strangers in a strange land. And very often what intrigues them most is not what I have to say about how education can best serve these students. No, they are mostly fascinated by me. "How did you succeed?" they ask. "If you succeeded, why can't others?" Sometimes these questions get asked out of genuine curiosity or concern. But I sometimes get irritated when I am asked these questions because I believe their intention is tied to the belief that if only students like me were not lazy, if only they would shed their past, if only they would truly be loyal and dedicated to schooling, they too could succeed.

So what is to be learned from a Mexican American scholarship woman who has felt the intense pressures to assimilate, from a university professor who now publishes in juried journals, attends meetings comprised of predominantly white males and addresses predominantly white audiences? I advocate that the most important lesson to be learned is that we must rethink the traditional model of teaching and learning. We must seriously consider whether the way

we presently structure education is appropriate for minority and majority traditional and nontraditional students. Despite the fact our student profile is changing dramatically, we continue to operate with a model that forces students to assimilate, to compete against each other, to think only in abstract, complex ways and to believe that cultural separation leads to academic power.

Recently, I have been conducting research about how culturally diverse students make the transition to college. The study is being conducted through the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching Learning and Assessment. We interviewed students toward the end of their first semester in community colleges in Arizona, California, Texas and North Carolina. Listening to these students' stories, I have been struck by how closely they parallel my own experience.

Let me share with you a little bit about what I have learned about community college student students. Many white and minority students, especially first generation students, are coming to college "wounded," having experienced failure, having serious doubts about their ability to be successful college students. I was struck how in so many instances many students had not been told they were college material. An Hispanic student articulated this point. He said:

I don't think college is emphasized in the local schools here, because I have lived in Orange County off and on for 16 years and you get a sense the kids that are good go to...prep schools...Here they just try to get you out, they just try to deal with the numbers and get you through the system and hang on to their jobs, and they just don't prep you for school. I was always a UCLA fan, but I never even conceived of going to college when I was in high school or in junior high or grade school.

For many nontraditional students attending college meant much more than getting an education--it meant escaping despair. Listen to the

voice of a white single mother attending a community college after 21 years. She said:

(My choice) was one of desperation. My husband had just abandoned me and my two children and I had to fight to get on welfare and when I got on welfare I didn't want to be on welfare...I called the Governor's office and I asked them, what can I do to get off welfare? They told me I had all the available grants and because I was a displaced homemaker and all the things that went along with it that I could go to school. It was sort of a dream...I thought that...you had to have a 3.5 average or something to go to college.

An American Indian student recounted how her mother had dramatized the need to get a college education. She said: **"Right before (my mother) died she took me out away from the reservation and she pointed it out to me and said, do you want to live like this, sitting around and doing nothing? Or do you want to go on?"**

An Hispanic student told me when he realized that getting a job lifting refrigerators and earning $7 an hour was going to lead to a dead end for him. He said:

One day I asked this one old guy who used to work there...doesn't everybody working for a company...after a year...become manager and you make big money?...And there was one ...guy walking by...He said, you see that guy right out there? He is only 23 years old and he's my boss now. And I go, what? And I was like, how come your boss is only 23 years old and you're like 50 years old already? And he said, if you want that job you have to have a degree and that's what I don't got...I could run this whole company by myself because I've been here so long, but because I don't have that piece of paper, I'll never make it. And after about a month of breaking my back because I needed the money, I said, you know what? I'm gone. And that's

when I first came to school this year. When I realized there's hope.

In our study, we heard students articulate doubt, fear and frustration. Some of this was related to invalidating experiences they had encountered both in- and out-of the classroom. We heard an Hispanic woman mention she was attending a community college because a counselor had told her she could not possibly learn to speak English. We heard Asian students say they felt like strangers in classes where they worried about speaking English and not recognizing the names of characters in novels or plays. We heard from students who had been out of college for 10-20 years and who were afraid of failure because they had never made an "A" in their lives. We heard students say they expected to be just a number in college. And one black woman actually discovered she was a number. Listen to what she said:

I was a number...instead of (the teacher) calling us by our name, he would call us by our social security number. There aren't that many people in class for him to go through all that and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number.

Many students felt disappointed because they felt their life experiences were not valued. I vividly remember a young black woman with a GED who had altered her resume to get a job on Wall Street. She told me how her life experience had been discounted. She said:

I went to secretarial school and I started working on Wall Street for an investment firm. I went in as a file clerk. Climbing the ladder up there is very easy. All You have to have is personality, a little charm. And within about two to three years, I was making my $35,000-$40,000 a year...I've always been quick on my feet. So it was easy for me to excel in New York. People are willing to teach you...But when I came to (the campus where I work) I was made to realize that I was a young black woman with hardly any

education...I was used to working with people who made big money and they trusted me with decisions. Like people would call me in for brokers and (sometimes) the broker was not there. If the client had money invested in a particular stock, even though I was not a broker, I could go in and transfer or give them a piece of IBM or AT&T. So...to come...and have someone speak to me as if I had the education of a five year old...that was a real bummer.

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned is that these student yearned for acceptance and validation. In other words, these students wanted to feel a part of the learning community and to know that they were capable of being successful college students. We wondered who or what was transforming these students into powerful learners. The students gave us the answer. What appeared to be transforming these students were different validating experiences they encountered both in- and out- of the classroom.

A black student disclosed his validating experience with his English teacher. He said:

(Some teachers) just come to school to get paid. She came to school to teach you. Plus she knew you had hard times and she understood. It was like if you couldn't come to class one day, the only thing you had to do was call her...If something was wrong, she could tell you how she felt. That's what teachers need to do more. Some just treat you like you're a statue.

This is a student who had never passed his English class and now he was saying, **"when I look at my report card, I want to go to school."**

A white woman described her transforming experience by saying:

I was amazed at...what I had preconceived that college would be like. I did not believe that the instructors would be so

personable with each individual and want to teach you--want to teach you. I thought it was what I heard (large universities) would be like, where you go out there and they don't care whether you come in or out or whatever, you're just a number and they don't care whether you learn or not, it's up to you to learn. And here people are helping us to get out minds in order to where we can learn. It's a process. It's like a nurturing process.

And we were pleasantly surprised when a group of Hispanic students told us that their teachers would not let them drop out. An Hispanic woman said,**"I think you know that when (the teachers) put the extra effort for you that you owe it to them to finish and to push yourself. You know they don't have to do that. They don't have to call you. They don't have to take or drive your homework to you. That's their gas. They're not getting paid. It's on their extra time. You feel like they care."**

Faculty were not the only validating agents. We heard from students who were encouraged by other students not to give up in class. And we also learned that some of the most powerful validation was occurring out of class. This happened when students talked with each other and helped each other with their homework in the patio areas or when students turned to their family members for support. When we asked students who were the most important people in their lives, they often mentioned family and friends. A black male talked about the most important person in his life by saying:

My little brother and my girlfriend. The reasons why my little brother...is because he is handicapped and coming from the same place, the same mother and father...There is so much love there. And my girlfriend. She supports me. She never turns me down. She just helps me. And you need that when you're going to school and growing up.

I could go on and on about the courage of these culturally diverse students, about how they negotiate the multiple demands of work, family, culture and school, about how they struggle to cope with the necessary losses associated with making the transition to college. But I want to tell you that the great lesson learned from my story and from these students' stories is that it is not only students who must learn to cope with college. Rather, colleges must help culturally diverse students adjust. Also, colleges must allow themselves to be changed by new student cultures.

I do not agree with Richard Rodriguez that assimilation into the mainstream culture is the key to total success. I believe that asking students to shed their culture, to forget the past, and to adopt totally new identities not only inflicts unnecessary pain, it damages the human spirit in such a way that the capacity of students to fully develop is dangerously stifled.

How can community colleges change? For one thing we must do a better job at understanding, appreciating and working with culturally diverse students. For the most part, students coming to community colleges are very vulnerable; they are afraid to fail. Many have been told they are incapable of learning. They are afraid of being wrong. They are afraid to challenge instructors. They want an education to escape the despair that often fills their lives. They want to erase the invalidating experiences they have encountered. They want to know that there is something they know, that there is something good inside of them and that their life experiences are valuable. Most of all they want to very much be a part of the learning community and to take from it all that it offers.

We need to understand that many of these students are going through some powerful transitional changes. They are breaking away from an old culture and adjusting to a new one. They are leaving old friends behind. They often feel guilty because they are no longer a full part of the culture from which they are breaking away. This means that we must make a more determined and concerted effort to

help students make the connection to college and to assist them to become powerful learners, while retaining their cultural pride and traditions.

Let me be clear about a very important point. Expecting students to get involved in college on their own is not going to work for nontraditional students. Merely offering opportunities for involvement will not work for passive students or doubtful students or for those who do not yet know how to take full advantage of the system. What is needed is the proactive academic and interpersonal validation of these students--a process that affirms, supports, enables and reinforces their capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals.

Simple things, such as calling students by name, calling students at home, stopping to talk to students in the halls or patio areas, meeting with students in- and out -of-class--all of these can help students feel worthwhile and that college is worth it. Further, it is absolutely critical that students experience academic success early on--not at the end of the semester, not at the end of the year, not when students graduate) but soon after the student enrolls in college. This means that instructors must structure learning so that students can know that they can do college level work early in the semester. Examples include having students watch videotapes of themselves, providing feedback on assignments, or having students work in groups on an assignment that is fun and intellectually exciting.

We must also find ways to change the linear model of teaching, where knowledge flows only from teacher to student. Many of us over-rely on the lecture method, when research is showing that many culturally diverse students do not learn best through lecture. Instead, we should focus on collaborative learning and dialogue that promote critical thinking, interpretation and diversity of opinion. Taking students on field trips, helping students form study groups, structuring learning so that students are exposed to diverse views--all of these foster an exciting learning climate. One student told us

she got excited about learning in her political science class because the professor didn't just talk, he acted. He often dressed up as Superman or other characters to make his points. And he gave out certificates at the end of the semester to all students.

We must also learn to diversify the curriculum by incorporating both the traditional core curriculum and perspectives that reflect the thinking and the contributions of women and minorities. I'll never forget the Hispanic students who told us they wanted to learn more about Chicano history and literature and the black students who led us to believe that white history was incomplete without everyone learning African American history.

Further, we must set high standards and instill in our minds that our students are truly capable of learning and can be taught to learn. Often when I talk to college faculty, I hear about how they are tired of spoon feeding students, how they have had to lower their standards, how students aren't motivated, how students don't care. And when I tell them they must help and nurture their students, they balk. Many faculty believe that college students must be held accountable for their actions, no matter what their past experience has been. While there is some truth to this, I also believe that there are surely ways of helping that make the ones we care for become stronger rather than weaker.

In the 1990s as our numbers multiply, our power goes. If colleges refuse to change, we will change them. We will claim the curriculum, for we have always been a part of history, science, music, art and literature. We will find our voice and use it to assert our rights and control our destiny. I do not hunger for the past. Instead, I yearn for the future.

I am always encouraged when I see more and more caring faculty and administrators like yourselves who are concerned about what you can do help culturally diverse students become successful college students. I know many of you want to do not what is politically

correct, but what is morally and ethically the right thing to do. Make no mistake about it. In your hands is the capacity to transform students. You have the power to validate students, to help even the most doubtful believe that they too can become powerful learners.

In the future, we can expect more and more students, like me, to knock on the community college door of opportunity. The day is coming when people of color will no longer be perceived as an oddity, an affirmative action hire or a minority. We will change community colleges and universities, even as they change us. And more and more of us will experience academic success--with few, if any regrets.